

KEY TERMS USED IN OUR WORK AND IN THIS REPORT

Race Forward's Levels of Racism

During the course of our three decades of in-person trainings and consulting for clients of various backgrounds and fields of work, Race Forward has developed definitions for “Four Levels of Racism” — two within the individual level of racism and two within the systemic level — that we re-introduce here. The key distinction is between the two levels of racism, individual and systemic. While we acknowledge the impact of individual acts of racial discrimination, we believe that it is critical to do so within a deeper analysis of systemic racial injustice.

INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL RACISM

INTERNALIZED RACISM lies within individuals. These are our private beliefs and biases about race and racism, influenced by our culture. Internalized racism can take many different forms including racial prejudice toward other people of a different race; internalized oppression, the negative beliefs about oneself by people of color; or internalized privilege, beliefs about superiority or entitlement by white people. An example is a belief that you or others are more or less intelligent, or beautiful, because of your race.

INTERPERSONAL RACISM occurs between individuals. These are biases that occur when individuals interact with others and their private racial beliefs affect their public interactions. Examples include racial slurs, bigotry, hate crimes, and racial violence.

SYSTEMIC-LEVEL RACISM

INSTITUTIONAL RACISM occurs within institutions and systems of power. It is the unfair policies and discriminatory practices of particular institutions (schools, workplaces, etc.) that routinely produce racially inequitable outcomes for people of color and advantages for white people. Individuals within institutions take on the power of the institution when they reinforce racial inequities. An example is a school system that concentrates people of color in the most overcrowded schools, the least-challenging classes, and the least-qualified teachers, resulting in higher dropout rates and disciplinary rates compared with that of white students.

STRUCTURAL RACISM is racial bias among institutions and across society. It involves the cumulative and compounding effects of an array of societal factors including the history, culture, ideology, and interactions of institutions and policies that systematically privilege white people and disadvantage people of color. An example is the overwhelming number of depictions of people of color as criminals in mainstream media, which can influence how various institutions and individuals treat people of color with suspicion when they are shopping, traveling, or seeking housing and employment — all of which can result in discriminatory treatment and unequal outcomes.

SYSTEMS ANALYSIS

What it is and why it's needed — Because the popular notion of racism is narrowly focused on personal prejudice and racial animus, a more complete analysis and presentation of race-related developments is needed. When racial dynamics are not sufficiently contextualized, it is easy to fall into the trap of victim blaming. A systems analysis adds context, reveals root causes and contributing factors, and surfaces possible corresponding solutions. A systems analysis involves an examination of questions: What institutional policies and practices are involved? What are the historical underpinnings and cumulative inequities? What cultural norms and popular ideas are reinforcing the problem? What is causing the racial inequities and tensions and what are possible solutions? If racial justice advocates adopt a routine and robust use of a systems analysis to inform our work — and the way we publicly communicate our issues — we can be a model for other advocates and journalists to do the same.